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The multiple voices of the « Indochinese » Style

Caroline Herbelin

Visiting assistant professor, Wesleyan University
Maître de conférences à l'Université de Toulouse Jean-Jaurès

Abstract

The so-called "Indochinese" style, created by Ernest Hébrard is often considered one of the avatars of successful regional style in the French empire. Designed between 1921 and 1926, this style seemed to be the natural corollary to the Franco-indigenous political association, which was being established at the same time. This style was adapted climatically, technically, and culturally to the country and was inspired by vernacular architecture: it could have been the ideal expression of the politic of mise en valeur of indigenous culture desired by Albert Sarraut. In reality, the Indochinese style was far from embodying the aims of the colonial government.

Although Hébrard's aim was indeed to create a "local" style for the colony, his style was a syncretism of several Asian models, from which he took his inspiration more structurally than formally. The aesthetic of his work did not evoke a specific vernacular style existing in the Indochinese peninsula. This functionalist approach was distinct from the culturalist view of the politic of the association's supporters. They wanted instead to mark clearly the cultures existing in the French colony as France was presenting itself as the essential connection between the five countries of the French Union. From an architectural point of view, the search of a regionalist style was therefore less about representing a French "local" identity in the colony, than it was about finding a specific style for indigenous buildings, with the idea to "renew" the "traditions" of the colonized. Therefore Hébrard encountered many difficulties with the colonial authorities, who were reluctant to complete his projects.

This divergence of views must be considered within the context of other attempts to search for a regionalist style that took place in Indochina around the same time: namely, that of George Groslier in Cambodia as well as that of the Vietnamese scholars of the AFIMA in Hanoi. This comparative approach allows us to understand the different agendas at stake in the search for a regionalist style and how different actors can use the vernacular reference with different meanings in colonial context.



Musée Louis Finot in Hanoi (1926-1932) by the architects Hébrard/Batteur